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SUBJECT: ORPA Comments on [] Assessment of Italian Local Elections

1. (As the [] article suggests,) the Andreotti government's position has probably been strengthened by the Christian Democratic gains and Communist losses in the local elections held last month. And Andreotti, as nearly all Italian politicians are saying, does stand a very good chance of remaining in office through the December presidential election, and possibly into 1979; the other widely shared expectation in Italy is that the presidential election will be followed by a national parliamentary election sometime during the first half of 1979.

2. Nonetheless, there is considerable turbulence beneath the surface of Italian politics, and several factors bear close watching.

-- The Communist Party line. The PCI's electoral setback raises a fundamental question for the party, namely whether the moderation summed up in the "historic compromise" concept is still an effective vote-getter. (In Berlinguer's initial analysis of the elections, he strongly defended the "historic compromise" strategy. But he also signaled his intention to implement it in a more aggressive way. The party has been "too generous" with the Christian Democrats, he argued, and has been punished by voters who expected it to push harder for fundamental changes. Thus, we are likely soon to see the PCI pressing for a larger voice in government decisions and being much more assertive about its policy preferences. But this will happen at precisely the time when Christian Democrats who criticize the present level of Communist influence have been emboldened by the election results to caution the government against further concessions. This is clearly a recipe for heightened political tension which, despite Andreotti's formidable strengths, could jeopardize his government in the period before December.)

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-- Political Violence. The Red Brigades have been generally quiet for the last three weeks, and the lower level of violence has contributed to the optimism about Andreotti's prospects. There is no evidence, however, that the Brigades' capability has been seriously dented. [Another major kidnapping, an assassination, or a general deterioration of the security situation would lead to calls for an emergency government including the Communists and perhaps, depending on the severity and duration of the violence, to greater receptivity on the part of Christian Democrats and others.]

(-- President Leone's Status. The scenario outlined in paragraph one rests on the assumption that Leone serves his full term as president. Top Christian Democrats, however, continue to see Leone as extremely vulnerable in connection with the Lockheed payoff trial, now in progress. Should Leone feel compelled to resign as the result of some particularly damaging revelation, the election of a successor would force Italian politicians to face an array of difficult problems ahead of schedule. The maneuvering involved in lining up a presidential majority in Italy's electoral college is likely to influence the pattern of interparty relationships for some time to come. Thus, a premature presidential election would advance the Italian political timetable and probably lead to Andreotti's resignation before December. (Andreotti is a leading contender for the presidency, along with Christian Democratic Secretary General Zaccagnini and Senate president Fanfani.)

3. [In sum, the odds do favor Andreotti's survival through December, but there is at least the usual number of wild cards in the Italian deck capable of upsetting this prediction.]

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